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On resupplying Saigon

By Joseph C. Harach

The greatest single danger to the survival of a non-Communist government in South Vietnam does not come from what its enemies can expect to win on the field of battle during the present fighting season. It comes rather from the box into which Congress has put American diplomacy on this matter.

The administration originally asked for \$1.45 billion for military aid to South Vietnam during the coming year. Congress cut this to \$700 million. Meanwhile the Soviets and Chinese continue to provide military aid to North Vietnam at roughly the level which the administration had intended to provide for South Vietnam. This means that the enemies of the Saigon government can afford to spend ammunition freely, knowing that they have the advantage in weapons. And they will continue to have the advantage so long as Congress puts an arbitrary limit on what Secretary of State Henry Kissinger can spend on weapons for South Vietnam.

Worse than this immediate disadvantage is the fact that so long as Congress fixes an arbitrary low limit Dr. Kissinger is deprived of bargaining power. He cannot go to the Soviets and the Chinese and offer to limit what he provides to Saigon if they will put a corresponding limit on what they give to Hanoi. Had he such bargaining power he could do for Southeast Asia what he is able to do over the Middle East.

Dr. Kissinger has substantial bargaining power over the Middle East because Congress is ready and eager to provide any amount of arms for Israel. Dr. Kissinger can talk business in Moscow because he can promise to restrain Congress on arms to Israel if they will put "reasonable" limits on what they provide to Israel's enemies. There has always been some balance in respective arms deliveries to the two sides in the Middle East.

But an arbitrary limit fixed by Congress on arms to Saigon will ultimately doom the cause of anti-communism in South Vietnam. Peking and Moscow only need to provide just a little more than Congress's limit — and their client sooner or later wins.

It is high time for Americans to consider thoughtfully whether they are willing to allow this to happen.

True, there is no contractual obligation on Americans to sustain the anti-Communist cause in South Vietnam. There never was a contractual obligation, no matter how much Lyndon Johnson used to say to the contrary. But there did evolve over the years a moral commitment to those who decided to make a fight for it in Vietnam in the expectation of American support.

I have always believed that a serious mistake was made immediately after World War II when Washington rejected the request for aid from Ho Chi Minh. Instead, it decided to back the effort of the French to reclaim their lost colonial position in Vietnam. A great river of human tragedy has flowed from that decision.

However, no one can go back and play that decision the other way. For better or worse, Ho Chi Minh's hand was refused, the French were backed

in their eventual failure at Dien Bien Phu, and this is 1975, not 1946.

There are some 20 million persons in South Vietnam, most of whom have proved by their actions that they prefer to live under a non-Communist government than be taken over by the government in Hanoi. They have kept up a struggle against the Communists for the entire lifetime of most of them. They have done so in the expectation of American support.

No one in his right mind would dream of sending American armed forces back into Vietnam. That was a disastrous mistake from the opening moment (when John F. Kennedy was President). But the reasons which exclude direct American military intervention do not necessarily work against matching the amount of military aid which goes to the other side in Vietnam.

If Dr. Kissinger were given a discretionary military budget he could propose to Peking and Moscow a mutual limit on arms aid to the respective sides. Unless and until he has a discretionary budget in his control, his hands are tied. He has no bargaining power.

Congress could give Dr. Kissinger room for maneuver in this matter by letting him decide how much of American weapons should go to Saigon at any given time. It would be the honorable course of action. It might also be the cheapest.